

THE CASE AGAINST THOUGHTFUL SOCCER?

A REVIEW OF A BOOK REVIEW

BY RUSS CARRINGTON

Stopping by a playground one afternoon, you watch ten youth players practicing soccer. They compete at a ball control game for ten minutes, followed by a chipping game, a 1 v 1 dribbling game, a shielding game, and three different shots. Then, they compete at a 5 v 5 scrimmage using some rules you're not familiar with: a three-touch restriction, a drop pass requirement, a side-to-side condition, and finally a one-touch restriction. An adult on the scene, in addition to being clumsy with a soccer ball, does little more than supervise the competitions. You eventually discern that he is masquerading as a soccer coach!

That dangerous scenario could become commonplace if enough coaches are exposed to my first book, *Thoughtful Soccer: The Think-First Approach to Playing and Coaching*. That's why Alan Blinzler's cautionary book review, posted at Amazon.com, is so important. Titled *Not Worth the Price Even if Free*, the review originally bore Blinzler's name—which has now been replaced with *Amazon Customer*.

Who is Blinzler, and how was he able to detect danger in a coaching model he hasn't actually tried? We used to engage in colorful soccer discussions at the And-Again soccer forum, some of which might remain in the archives there. Although I've never met him in person, I know he's an experienced soccer coach and administrator with ties to the established soccer model.

Writing about Donald Trump in a recent editorial, Washington Post columnist Kathleen Parker notes that Plato believed that:

“... rhetoric, or the art of persuasion, in the wrong hands was dangerous and likely to be abused to appeal to people's base motives. He foresaw the unethical, dishonest uses that a skilled but immoral speaker could put his persuasive powers to, with credulous people eager to believe or buy whatever he was selling.”

Could Thoughtful Soccer be a case of rhetoric in the wrong hands, i.e. mine? If so, what better person to detect the underhandedness in that rhetoric than Blinzler? He also happens to be a lawyer! So a word-for-word review of his review should be revealing for soccer coaches *and* would-be philosophers. A little forum background even comes into play.

INTRODUCTION, DISCLAIMER, AND PURPOSE

Blinzler begins his review by establishing himself as an authority, hinting at a disclaimer, and implying his altruistic purpose.

“I have coached youth soccer for over twenty years, from the basic recreational level to State Champions. In addition, I have been involved with establishing soccer education courses. I was first exposed to the author's ideas six years ago and to his book three years ago. I have read his book and corresponded with him at length.”

Blinzler knows danger when exposed to it because he is a soccer authority. Although we corresponded by trading insults at length, and although he might have a financial stake in his own coaching model, such things won't influence his book review.

"To me the purpose of a review is to help a purchaser decide if the book is worth the money or if another book or source is a better value."

Blinzler assures us that the purpose of his *specific* review, and not just of book reviews *in general*, is to help purchasers with their finances. Otherwise, we might think he's trying to help himself with his own finances, given his involvement with coaching courses. Or we might think he's protecting soccer forums from dangerous ideas, given that he warned me he would post the book review unless I stopped talking about Thoughtful Soccer, my book, or the other one-star book reviews posted by concerned forum members.

ARE AGE-APPROPRIATE CURRICULUMS NECESSARY?

Blinzler doesn't evaluate things about the book that might tempt the unwary, such as the overall organization, the clarity of presentation, the bird's-eye-view soccer diagrams, or the funny illustrated fables. Instead, he evaluates the book's dangers or *flaws*. The first has to do with what are commonly called *age-appropriate curriculums* but which I now call *age-by-age curriculums* because it's hard to critique anything that is *appropriate*.

Vital to the established model, such curriculums take all the soccer lessons players must learn and div-vy them out to different age groups. Players are to learn the basic skills when young, the basic tactics when a little older, the more complicated tactics for larger-sided play when older still, and so on. And to fit nicely into the curriculum, players are to begin playing soccer when young rather than when older, the major plan for those late starters being what is called the *recreational division*. Before coaching these successive age groups, coaches are to take those coaching courses Blinzler helps establish. I haven't reached the 11 v 11 coaching course yet, which explains why I wasn't qualified to design a system of play or to coach 11 v 11 for my previous nine years as a high school coach.

"The book has a number of flaws. First, it is written with the assumption that all people, regardless of age, learn in the same manner. That is wrong. Generally, children younger than eight learn differently than children who are twelve, and they in turn learn differently than adults."

Behaviorists would have us believe that the same learning principles like positive reinforcement, schedules of reinforcement, and stimulus control can explain the behavior of rats, soccer players of different ages, and all other human beings. But as Blinzler points out, new learning principles actually kick in every two years. That's why a complicated age-by-age curriculum is necessary. And to understand each age group's psychology, of course, coaches must attend the next coaching course.

"Today, coaching courses across the world emphasize age specific learning. While every child is different and some are able to learn concepts and skills far earlier than others, the vast majority need lessons tailored to their age. There are many resources designed for beginning coaches targeted to the players' age. For example, the Novice Coach Series DVD's produced by US Youth Soccer split instruction into three age groups: 6 to 8; 8 to 10; and 10 to 12. A search of Amazon offers many books targeted at players by age."

Blinzler points out that the popularity of an idea proves its validity, as with earth shape and bloodletting a while back. The curriculums must be necessary if smart, important soccer people around the world think so. Those people didn't just meet at the Holiday Inn, list all the things players must learn, divvy those things out to different age groups, and then realize a lot of coaching courses were necessary. They performed an exhaustive study of the science of human development and then realized complicated curriculums and a lot of coaching courses were necessary.

Thoughtful Soccer has engaged in a dangerous act of oversimplification. It breaks soccer into fewer parts, and provides playground-like activities for strengthening each part. The activities are enjoyable and allow endless improvement, so they don't have to be discarded every two years as the players graduate to the next age group. Thoughtful Soccer claims to be relevant for six-year-olds, eight-year-olds, ten-year-olds, adolescents, and adults. That could lead to a dangerous reduction in coaching courses.

SHOULD PRACTICES HAVE ONE THEME OR SEVERAL?

The established model advocates single-theme practices, where the coach teaches one skill or tactic using a logical progression of practice activities culminating in a final scrimmage. Thoughtful Soccer advocates multiple-theme practices, where the coach facilitates a series of skill games and scrimmages that develop several skills and tactics equally, and teaching is optional. Blinzler addresses that book flaw next.

"A second flaw is the book's "multiple theme" approach, an approach that offers a few minutes of a skill and then moves to another activity with another skill, then to another and finally another that includes tactical instruction. At best only a few minutes are spent on any skill."

What's better, single-theme practices or multiple-theme practices? The smart aleck answer is that each has pros and cons. Single-theme practices can cover a theme thoroughly. But strengthening a theme taught previously is difficult, because the team keeps moving on to something new. Multiple-theme practices can't cover a theme as thoroughly in one practice. But strengthening a theme taught previously is easy, because the same practice happens over and over. If that viewpoint is valid, coaches could learn both methods and choose the method that best fits the situation. They could even combine both methods within the same practice—a dangerous proliferation of coaching options.

Anyway, a few paragraphs later, Blinzler proves that single-theme practices don't have difficulty strengthening themes that were taught previously.

"A practice for beginning players that focuses on one skill and then encourages players to work on that skill within a practice scrimmage results in far faster learning. A single theme practice does not limit players to only one activity in the practice. The theme may be how to receive the ball; however, players still pass the ball and dribble. The focus of the coach, the corrections made, and the scrimmage, are each designed to increase opportunities to perform the desired skill. The next practice is then planned to introduce a complementary skill: e.g., one week is dribbling; the next is how to tackle. This allows the coach to reinforce what was learned the previous week, while focusing on a new skill. A good coaching book will show the coach how to construct such a practice. This book fails in this regard and suggests a format that will slow your players' learning."

Because of this clever coupling of themes, the team doesn't move on to a completely unrelated theme every practice. Just every two practices, since if a theme were always coupled with its complementary mate, dribbling would be followed by tackling, which would be followed by dribbling, and the team would be trapped in an endless loop. Now suppose the theme is how to receive the ball. Players will still dribble, tackle, and shoot a bit during the scrimmage at the end of practice. Some players might even get a try or two at chipping, shooting with the weaker foot, or heading—far better than the 20 tries of each a multiple-theme practice can give every player in every single practice.

Blinzler concludes his previous paragraph with an important lesson in logic. A lot of other good coaching books show the coach how to construct a single-theme practice. So if I wanted to write a good book, I should have pilfered that stuff rather than describing how to construct a different kind of practice.

Blinzler bolsters his argument against multiple-theme practices with research:

“Research demonstrates that players who are skilled will enjoy soccer more than unskilled players and stay in the sport far longer. It is imperative that players learn basic skills, like “first touch.” This research indicates that an average player requires six hours to gain enough proficiency to perform a skill in a game with a reasonable chance of success. With most recreational programs having only one practice a week lasting about an hour, a multiple theme practice diminishes the time players have to gain proficiency with any one skill. The result is players who know a little about a lot, but cannot perform any skill successfully.”

He's probably referring to the long-term Gilchrest and Espinosa study, *Fun and Longevity Among Skilled Versus Unskilled Soccer Players*. The researchers encountered problems when the players placed in the unskilled group, upon learning to read, got hold of *Thoughtful Soccer*, and began playing high-impact skill activities in the backyard. The glitch was solved, the study followed the players to the age of 21, and the results were conclusive. Not only did players in the skilled group have more total enjoyment. More of them were still playing soccer, because the players confined to the unskilled group got angry and took up croquet.

What about those six hours of practice time required before applying a skill in a game successfully? That of course refers to applying a skill in a real game of soccer, not a Thoughtful Soccer skill game. A Thoughtful Soccer skill game allegedly lets players learn the skill in the first place, which Blinzler later proves is impossible. Suppose the recreational coach with one practice per week tries my multiple-theme approach, and has the players compete for 15 minutes at a shielding game each practice. A whopping 24 practices would be needed to reach those six hours, after which the skill would continue getting stronger. And other skill games would be strengthening other skills at the same time. Using the single-theme approach, the same coach could spend six full weeks on shielding, reach the six required hours, create matches that consisted entirely of shielding, and worry about little else until next season!

A serious blow to Thoughtful Soccer, this research proves that my youth players who moved on to college soccer could not perform any skill successfully and that the ones who continued playing into their 30's were not having fun.

SHOULD THE TACTICS BE POSTPONED UNTIL THE SKILLS ARE IN ORDER?

With the established model, players must be taught a lot of soccer lessons, one per practice. Naturally, any age-appropriate curriculum will place the skill lessons first. But with the dangerous multiple-theme approach, fun skill games and tactically rich scrimmages are to be combined in the same practice. And this can happen fairly early in player development, even if the skills are a bit undeveloped. Specifically, players can compete at the tactically rich scrimmages as soon as they can enjoy doing so. That's the next book flaw spotted by Blinzler.

“No matter the age, beginning players need to learn ball skills first. Once players develop a satisfactory level of ball mastery, the coach can move to elementary tactics. This book starts with tactical soccer from day one.”

Thoughtful Soccer focuses on a few practice activities to facilitate rather than a lot of soccer lessons to teach. There are activities for the individual skills like dribbling, and for the teamwork skills like keeping possession. Therefore, the unwary coach is tempted to get players competing at both types of activities as soon as they are able rather than waiting until some age-appropriate curriculum gives the green light. The risk, of course, is that players will then improve at the skills and the tactics simultaneously and go further with both rather than playing tactically stupid soccer while waiting for the skills to improve.

MUST COACHES TEACH THE SKILLS?

Teaching the skills is difficult. As Blinzler points out, the coach must demonstrate correct technique, spot flawed technique, and make corrections. That's why the average parent volunteer coach has trouble climbing the soccer pyramid even after taking those coaching courses Blinzler helps establish. Thoughtful Soccer represents a dangerous shortcut whereby the average parent volunteer coach develops skillful players just by facilitating the right skill games over and over. That's flaw number three.

“A third flaw is the book's suggestion that a coach need not know skills to teach them. Rather a player can repeat the skill multiple times, without instruction, and learn through repetition alone. This is the hoary idea that “practice makes perfect.” As one coach I know likes to say, “Practice only makes permanent”. If you are practicing correctly, repeated tries will reinforce the correct technique. If you are practicing poor technique, you are cementing bad habits. Nothing in this book guides the coach on what is correct technique, how to recognize flaws in technique or how to correct the flaws when they are spotted. A recommended coaching book that approaches how to plan a practice is “Developing Youth Soccer Players”, by Horst Wein.”

If the same flawed skill is *repeated* over and over during a boring, noncompetitive drill, it won't be improving. It will be staying exactly the same, because that's what *repeated* means! That proves that the method I actually use—letting players experiment with a skill over and over during an exciting, competitive game—won't lead to improvement either. That's why u-littles not ready for skill lessons shouldn't experiment with skills during fun games. It's also why playground soccer, unless skill instruction has been provided beforehand, is so dangerous.

Rather than tempting coaches with cost-effective shortcuts, a good soccer book would show coaches how to teach the skills. A lot of other good soccer books already do that, but we can never have too much of a good thing.

CAN SCRIMMAGE RULES INSTILL POSSESSION HABITS?

Scrimmages with possession-enhancing rules are an important piece of the Thoughtful Soccer puzzle. Operating under the illusion that my players were strategizing, communicating, and thinking a lot during these scrimmages, I called them *thoughtful scrimmages* or *thoughtscrim*s. Each one strengthens one or more possession keys. For example, in the Three-and-a-Drop scrimmage, players are limited to three touches and must use a drop pass at some point during each possession. In the Side-to-Side scrimmages, the ball must reach each sideline at least one time. And in the One-Touch scrimmage, players are limited to one touch at a time. The rules don't stipulate when to use a drop pass or side-to-side maneuver or how often. All the while, the players must navigate the conditions and score goals. Blinzler explains why these tactically rich *scrimmages* are actually robotic, coma-inducing *drills*.

"A fourth, and a serious flaw in a book that seeks to be thoughtful, is the robotic nature of the drills, called "thoughtscrim"s. Soccer is a player's game; not the coach's. There are no time outs, few stoppages in play, and a constantly evolving situation. Coaches can rarely influence a game during play. This means the players must learn to analyze play and think for themselves. When players move to basic tactical play, the best coaches teach the players to see and select the best options. Rather than fixed solutions, the good coach teaches fundamental principles of the game so the player learns how to think and can exploit those principles to control the game."

At least I had the correct end result in mind. Soccer *is* a constantly evolving situation. Players *do* need to think for themselves, and apply various principles like the possession keys to select the best option for the situation. But thoughtscrim, my means-to-the-end for the past 25 years, were actually moving my players in the opposite direction without me noticing.

"This book does not do that. Rather it suggests a problem, and then a single solution that mandates the players to act without thought. Teaching players to think is the essence of being a good soccer coach. Giving a fixed solution harms a player's development for the player does not learn to adjust as the game changes. A far better book that offers examples of how to coach players to think from the earliest ages to more advanced levels is "The Principles of Brazilian Soccer", by Thadeu Goncalves."

The problem I thought I was suggesting is when new players send every ball forward, which leads to bunch ball, then straight-to-goal soccer, then difficulty holding late leads against Brazil, Mexico or, most recently, Ecuador.

The 15 solutions I thought I was providing (six possession keys, three quick-start rules, three bread-and-butter scrimmages, and three advanced scrimmages) were really only one *fixed solution*.

Getting players to act without thought isn't easy, and I at least deserve credit for trying. But I was blind to the tragedy of the fixed solution. Suppose you want to help your players dribble, so you teach them a particular move and then have them practice it over and over. Tragedy of the fixed solution, even if you next teach them other moves and then let them choose between those moves. And suppose

you work with them on one possession key at a time and then let them choose between those keys? Tragedy of the fixed solution. They won't be able to choose, because you've turned them into robots.

According to a USSF training manual, coaches who can't teach can do a lot of good by organizing unstructured free scrimmages during which they don't say anything. Unstructured free scrimmages, apparently, have value even if the skills are performed incorrectly, even if every ball does go forward. Robot inducement doesn't happen until we add touch restrictions, drop pass requirements, side-to-side conditions, and the like. That's why thoughtscrimms have now been banned from playgrounds around the world.

ARE MY ACCOUNTS TRUSTWORTHY?

Next, Blinzler proves that the exercises—i.e., the competitive games and tactically rich scrimmages—will produce disaster rather than the results I claim. Furthermore, my own accounts of my own results are not to be trusted. Time for that forum background you've been anxiously awaiting.

“Finally, many of the exercises in Thoughtful Soccer are little more than recipes for disaster. No one other than the author has reported any success with the exercises and strategies he suggests, such as the Triangle Three. Also, situations where the author claimed his systems were used turned out not to use his systems of play.”

My career as an untrustworthy witness began at age eight when my mother told me not to eat the peanut butter Tandy Cakes in the refrigerator. Being addicted to that particular snack, I ate them anyway. My mother asked me if I had eaten the Tandy Cakes, and I said no. Overcome by guilt 15 minutes later, I confessed. As Blinzler might point out, that makes me a self-confessed liar unless I made the story up.

In establishing that no one other than me has reported success with Thoughtful Soccer, Blinzler draws primarily from the vast population of forum posters who think Thoughtful Soccer is too stupid to even try. He might also draw from my players and assistant coaches who read his review, began thinking Thoughtful Soccer might be stupid, and commiserated with him on the sly. That's a representative sample of humanity, so Blinzler didn't need to consider the book reviewers who tried and liked Thoughtful Soccer or the players, assistant coaches, parents, and referees from my county who might have favorable opinions. Then again, he might be alluding to that scientific study of my system of play, the Triangle Three.

My Triangle Three system evolved through trial-and-error as I played and coached, and had pretty much reached its current form by the mid-1990's. I wasn't qualified to design a system, because I hadn't had the appropriate coaching course. But the system seemed to meet the criteria I believe in, such as controlling the field's middle, keeping a two-player offside line, and allowing several useful variations. Because I was the only person at the soccer forum who had tried the system, I was also the only one to have reported success with it other than Alex C. My ex middle fullback, currently in his 30's, he dropped in at the forum one day and said some nice things about the Triangle Three. Thinking he must be me in disguise since nobody else could like my Triangle Three, everyone insulted him and he left.

One day, a poster from England who had seemed sympathetic to my cause suddenly did an about-face. He said he had set up a Triangle Three experiment by assembling 22 or so highly skilled players, creating two teams, and teaching one team the Triangle Three *as he understood it*. The two teams then played a match, the Triangle Three team gave up an astronomical number of goals in one half alone, the players ridiculed the whole thing, and he became my lifetime adversary.

For the longest time, I couldn't understand the animosity toward the Triangle Three. Then I had an aha experience. The other posters all shared a fundamental misunderstanding. Once the ball approaches my back line, I have the middle fullback continually shift to the line between ball and goal as the ball is passed. That's simple even for slower players—sorry Alex!—and it's just like the windshield wiper role a defensive midfielder can play in a Flat Back Four. But because I used the word *pressure* to describe this action, they thought I want the middle fullback to chase the ball all over the pitch while the other defenders watch. Were that the case, Alex would no longer be with us. So I now use the word *interpose* to describe how my middle fullback operates.

I immediately began wondering about that Triangle Three experiment. When it took place, did the experimenter have the same bizarre understanding of my middle fullback's role? If so, why did he deprive 22 good players of a sunny afternoon instead of just guessing what would happen? Why wasn't he now eager to run the experiment the right way and become my good buddy again? Had the experiment happened at all? And that's how a controlled scientific test of one system proves that no one other than me has reported success with any of my exercises and strategies in the plural.

Next are all those situations where I claimed someone was using my systems, but the person wasn't really using my *system* of play. Another Triangle Three forum story can clarify those confusing shifts between the singular and the plural.

A sucker for historical facts, I would occasionally mention the high school team that learned the Triangle Three from me one year and began using it. I hadn't actually worked with the team, and all it had to go on was a letter I wrote to the head coach explaining the system. The team's first year with the system went well, and the team's second year with the system went really well. Thanks to a talented cast that could overcome Triangle Three deficiencies, the team won every match and registered nine consecutive shutouts before losing 2-1 in overtime of the Maryland state semifinal—a match I attended. Naturally, I concluded that a Triangle Three was viable at a high level of play.

When I became the JV coach at the same school a few years later, the coaches and players still used a Triangle Three *formation* but called it something else. They had also changed the *response plan*—who does what in different situations—in a few minor ways. Rather than keeping the middle fullback in front of the two outside fullbacks as often as I do, they allowed that player to rotate to the back line where more speed is needed. It was at that point that the distinction between a Triangle Three's *formation* and its *response plan* dawned on me. Of course a team that learned the formation from me wouldn't use my exact response plan! I wasn't there to teach it to them, and such things evolve over time.

I quickly reported this humbling discovery at the forum, solidifying my reputation as a self-admitted liar. That high school team was a good test of my formation but not of my response plan, because my exact same plan wasn't used. Though inspired to borrow my invention, that high school team succeeded only by changing the invention in a few minor ways. And that is why my accounts of the Triangle Three *system* and all my other *systems* can't be trusted.

IS THERE ONE ORIGINAL ACTIVITY THAT IS ALSO VALID?

Blinzler concludes his book review by pointing out that the book doesn't contain any original activities that are also valid. So why buy it?

“There are some valid activities in the book; activities that have been used for years by others. There is no reason to purchase this book for these few activities. They can be found elsewhere.”

Blinzler doesn't commit to which specific things go in which categories, but I can help with that. There must be at least two valid activities in the book, since he uses the plural *activities*. I must have pilfered both or all of those activities, since they can be found elsewhere and I don't give due credit to anyone else. There must also be some invalid activities in the book—specifically, all the ones I invented. And there must not be any theories in the book that are valid as well as original, since that might lead someone to buy the book. The one activity Blinzler might have had trouble categorizing was the original and invalid game called *Space Cowboy*.

As my book neared completion, I came up with the invalid theory that soccer has a Breakthrough Part where players use teamwork and combinations to break through the offside line. If I wanted to talk about that, I needed an invalid playground-like game for practicing it. But how could I provide players with many tries at breaking through the offside line in a short period of time? A real match doesn't help much, because possession is usually lost before the offside line is reached. What if I created two offside lines, allowed players to attack them from either direction, and eliminated the possession battle that occupies most matches? That strange way of thinking led to the invalid field setup and rules. I tried the game with one youth team and then included it in the book. I still expose my high school players to *Space Cowboy* weekly, sometimes as the feature activity in a single-theme practice about combinations. But I believe my memory of having invented it must be a surgical implant, like in *The Matrix* or *Total Recall*.

Blinzler's final sentence summarizes the important financial decision awaiting the purchaser.

“If free this book would not be worth the purchase price.”

As Washington Wizards play-by-play man Steve Buchantz might say, “Dagger!” I had to get out my calculator here. Suppose the book could be found for \$.25, which will soon be the case if enough people read Blinzler's review. And suppose all the things that harm player development by contradicting Blinzler's soccer model have a negative value of minus \$10,000.00. Clearly, the book would not be worth the purchase price of \$10,000.25. Note that this math holds up only because *Space Cowboy*, if original, is not valid. Otherwise, someone could read only the *Space Cowboy* part, throw the book away, and recoup the \$.25 value without losing the ten grand.

To paraphrase Plato, I have apparently used Thoughtful Soccer rhetoric to appeal to people's base motives of achieving soccer competence without attending a lot of coaching courses. And thanks to Blinzler's book review, they can avoid the dangers of playground soccer without even pondering the issues.